



chaa creek  
WILDLY CIVILIZED



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## *True jungle experience*



The Lodge at Chaa Creek has become one of Belize's most recognised eco resorts, providing unique adventure travel experiences for thousands of visitors ever since founding owners Mick and Lucy Fleming first opened their doors to guests in 1981.

Offering a blend of natural beauty, history and culture within an atmosphere of affordable, casual luxury, Chaa Creek continues to attract growing numbers of travellers, many of whom would be surprised to discover that this stunning eco resort began life as the dream of two young adventurers wishing to

establish a small farm along the banks of a remote jungle river.

The dream began more than 30 years ago, when Mick and Lucy arrived in Belize from England. Belize at that time was still a British colonial protectorate, and within a couple of months the Flemings met a Royal Air Force Regiment commander stationed in Belize City who owned an overgrown farm situated on the Macal River in the Cayo District.

It was a remote, disused property that he was happy to lease to the Flemings.



“It was completely under bush in those days,” Lucy recalls. “The only way in was by canoe, horse or on foot.”

Mick and Lucy immediately fell in love with the property. They returned with machetes and basic supplies, and before long the land was producing homegrown vegetables – followed by milk, yoghurt, cheese and eggs.

The young pioneer farmers were soon part of

the landscape, becoming familiar fixtures on market day in San Ignacio, the closest town, reached by canoeing down river or by horseback though a rudimentary dirt tract.

In those days, tourism in the interior of Belize was almost non-existent. Most travellers were Europeans, curious about this unique English-speaking former Crown colony or on their way to other Central American destinations. Some, hearing about a hospitable



young couple farming in the remote rainforest, would come out to visit, sometimes even staying to lend a hand.

As the influx of visitors grew, Lucy recalls, she and Mick decided to build a simple guest cottage, using materials sourced from the jungle and built with the thatch and pole construction local people had used for centuries.

“And that was the birth of Chaa Creek Cottages,” Lucy said.

That was in 1981, and two years later the Flemings built another cottage, soon followed by a dining room and a few simple amenities. Soon the dirt track was expanded into a dirt road to handle the steadily increasing traffic. Indoor plumbing was introduced along with six more cottage rooms, a 6,000 gallon water tower, staff quarters and a gift shop displaying the work of local craftspeople.



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Electricity arrived at Chaa Creek in 1987, and by 1988 hot water showers were available. The Flemings built an office, installed outdoor lighting and continued constructing and improving Chaa Creek's signature thatch roof cottages.

As Lucy puts it, "We never really stopped. We've been building every year of our lives, and I suppose we'll continue doing that."

As Chaa Creek grew, so did the Flemings' appreciation and respect for Belize's ecology and culture. As they expanded their home-

stead, they made it a priority to protect the area's vibrant yet fragile ecosystem.

"Sensitive construction and creative recycling has always been part of our development, and – with the help of our guests' suggestions and ideas, we are continually minimising our impact on the environment," Lucy said.

## A GATEWAY TO ADVENTURE

Today, Chaa Creek sits within a 365-acre private nature reserve with a well maintained trail system linking a range of attractions and

amenities. The internationally recognised Hilltop Spa offers professional spa treatments with a panoramic view of the Maya Mountains and surrounding rainforest, while the Mariposa restaurant provides a fine dining experience using locally sourced meats, Caribbean seafood and produce grown at the resorts' own organic Maya farm.

Other attractions include an infinity swimming pool, a conference centre, the Blue Morpho butterfly farm, Belize Natural History Centre, horse stables, a fleet of canoes and more.

Chaa Creek also offers tours, both within the resort's sprawling nature reserve and throughout Belize, giving guests access to the

country's myriad Maya temples and archaeological sites, the Great Barrier Reef, and the many other attractions to be found along Belize's unspoiled Caribbean coast and offshore cayes, such as the popular Ambergris Caye and Placencia Village.

Closer to home, Chaa Creek's licenced naturalist guides conduct bird watching and other nature-based tours within the private nature reserve, including the popular "Creatures of the Night" evening tour, as well as morning and sunset guided canoes excursions along the Macal River.

Other activities, such as cave tubing, zip lining and guided tours through Belize's vast network of Maya ceremonial caves, including





the artefact-laden Actun Tunichil Muknal sacred cave, can also be arranged through the resort's front desk.

There is a range of accommodation options for families, couples, groups and individuals, including the collection of individually appointed thatched-roofed cottages and luxurious suites, such as the Tree-Top, Jacuzzi Villas and Spa Villas, all set within gorgeous tropical gardens that attract a symphony of exotic birds. The more rustic, budget priced Macal River Camp is adjacent to the main resort.

Lucy said that they plan to introduce two new family villas next year which will be

built to incorporate cutting-edge sustainable technology.

“Our growth over the years has been organic, allowing us to harmonise the manmade and natural environments, and this has resulted in Chaa Creek's low impact, natural feel,” Lucy explained.

“And, by being able to offer such a wide range of attractions, amenities and tours, we've developed the reputation as Belize's ‘Destination within a destination’, meaning that travellers can have a complete, comprehensive Belize vacation right here, or through the network of colleagues we've developed over the last few decades,” she added.



“For example, guests can visit Maya temples here in the morning, and be snorkelling off white sandy Caribbean beaches that same afternoon, effectively giving them two Belize holidays in one.

“I think that’s what makes Belize, and Chaa Creek, so unique.”

In addition to a green, environmentally sustainable ethos, another thing that sets Chaa Creek apart is the Flemings’ drive to constantly improve and develop new activities.

As one example, this year Chaa Creek launched a new rainforest safari using an all-terrain vehicle to allow guests to visit parts of the reserve that haven’t been previously accessible.

“We take them all the way out in the bush to the Cohune Ridge, and to some unexplored Maya temple sites,” Lucy says. “We also have a new river safari, which gives guests the chance to explore the Macal River on the “Miss Macal”, a traditional Belizean John boat that once plied these rivers.”

“As we evolve and grow, and with suggestions from our employees and guests, new

ideas are always cropping up,” she adds.

## GIVING BACK

Chaa Creek has received an impressive number of awards and accolades over the years, including the prestigious World Travel Awards, given to “acknowledge, reward and celebrate excellence across all sectors of the global travel and tourism industry”. In 2014, Chaa Creek won the World Travel Award as “Belize’s Leading Spa Resort”.

That accolade is just one from a long list that Chaa Creek has received from environmental and industry groups over the years. The Flemings’ commitment to environmental conservation, natural history education and sustainable tourism has been recognised by numerous industry bodies and publications, including the Belize Tourism Board, Conde Nast Magazine, National Geographic Adventure Magazine, Travel and Leisure Magazine, Top Ten International Eco-Escapes, Trip Advisor, World’s Top Hotels & Resorts, Zagat Survey, and others. Chaa Creek has also been repeatedly rated by Caribbean Travel & Life Readers’ Poll as the “Best Eco Resort & Hotel in the Caribbean”.

Lucy said that level of international recogni-

tion is a credit to the hard work of their 150 staff members, who she refers to as the “Chaa Creek family.”

“Since day one, when we employed a few young people from local families, we realised that our extended family of staff members was part and parcel of success. Our staff members know they are valued, and this is reflected in their commitment and level of service.



“I think that shows,” she added.

At the same time, Lucy also credits Chaa Creek’s long history of environmental responsibility and community engagement as a factor in their success. Under the Chaa Creek Cares initiative, 10 per cent of all accommodation revenue goes directly into so-

cial and environmental programs or contributions.

Examples of those programs include Chaa Creek’s Environmental Education Outreach program, which “takes environmental education directly to schools and many special events throughout Belize.” Chaa Creek also established the Belize Foundation for Conservation to “promote environmental education, cultural awareness and sustainable con-



servation practices.”

Each year, the Lodge at Chaa Creek also hosts hundreds of local and overseas students, and sponsors internship positions in ecotourism and responsible travel through programs at their Natural History Centre, Blue Morpho Breeding Centre, Rainforest Medicinal Trail

and other Chaa Creek operations.

Many other Chaa Creek sponsored programs – including a scholarship and the annual “Eco-Kids environmental education summer camp” – provide educational and personal development opportunities for Belizean students. The resort also offers financial assistance and community support programs that benefit local charities and welfare programs, such as the Octavia Waight Old Folks Centre, the Cayo Deaf Institute and the Marla House of Hope Orphanage.

On an international level, Chaa Creek has partnered with a number of agencies, organizations and individuals – such as the New York Botanical Gardens and the Foundation for Wildlife Conservation in an effort to facilitate environmental conservation and research projects such as the Birds Without Borders avian survey.

Lucy said that Chaa Creek’s commitment to the environment and community is a natural response to living and raising a family in Belize, where goodwill and assistance between neighbours and colleagues is enshrined in the old Belizean saying of; “Hand wash Hand”.

“We’ve been so blessed by living here, and having received so much from the land and the people, that it’s only natural to try to give back where and when we can.

“Helping one another is a very Belizean instinct, and just one of the things that makes life here so rewarding. It’s fostered an ethos of contributing to both the land and society that nurtured us,” she explains.

Lucy said Chaa Creek will continue to abide by that ethos as the resort continues growing and as she and Mick continually discover new ways for visitors to enjoy an authentic, satisfying jungle experience.

“There’s nothing like seeing the look on our guests faces, young, old and in-between, as they connect with nature and discover what I can only describe as the magic of Belize.

“That’s really what it’s all about,” she smiles.

For more on Chaa Creek and their many adventure tourism opportunities, visit <http://www.chaacreek.com/>

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